A LUCIFER OF THE HOUSETOPS

BY WILLIAM GILMORE BEYMER

Illustrations By G.W. HARTING

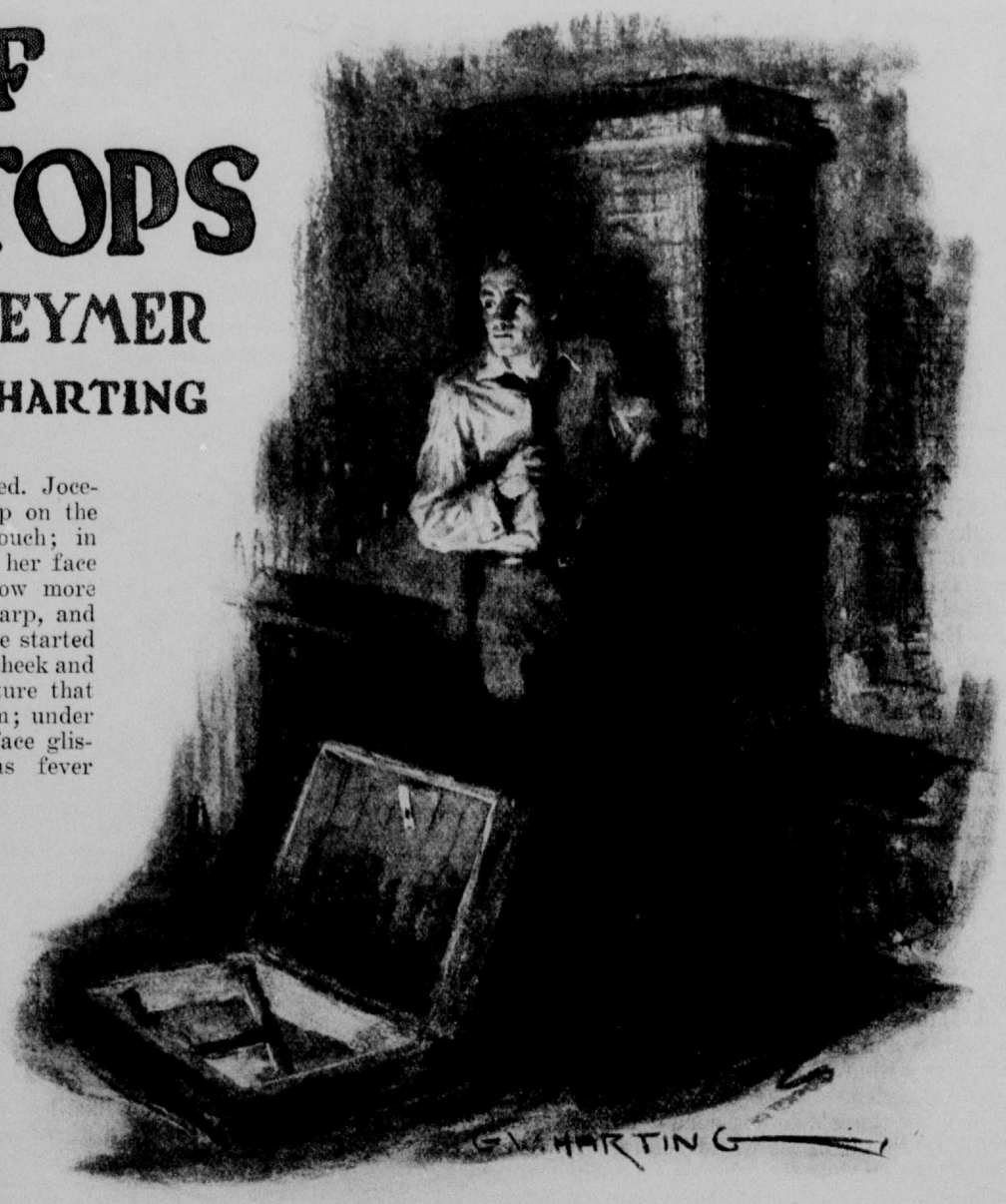
THERE WAS NO AIR that night. It is that which I remember first of all. That this should be so is strange; for, from the moment that I put my head above the coaming of the hatchway in the roof, I gave no heed to heat or cold or storm; I saw that my wife was gone. So it is ludicrous that of such a night I remember first of all so trivial a matter as the heat, yet each flutter of memory brings the same mental, fish-like gasp for air.

A little rain had fallen at dawn, and when the sun arose in a passion of heat from the very horizon, the whole city had awakened and steamed and sweated and stank. With the sunrise there had returned the celebrants of the night before, and for a few hours fire-crackers had sputtered and snapped — it was the Fourth of July — and the lifeless air had grown yet heavier with the acrid stench of burnt powder. But as the heat arose in yet higher, more shimmering waves above the softening asphalt streets, the popping of fire-crackers had grown intermittent, then had ceased for half-hours at a time. Everywhere, the streets were deserted; those unfortunates who were left in the city crept into rooms with drawn blinds and waited, just waited, for the mercy of sunset. I believe that in all the kiln-like city there were left only the very poor, for it seems incredible that there should remain any who might have gone.

Jocelyn and I remained because we were of the very poor. We sat listless in the murky room and like the others we waited — waited. Through the time-yellowed blinds of the skylight the sun beat in without sound, or effort, or cessation. We sat silent, betraying the same unspoken thoughts by the same expression in our telltale eyes, thoughts of what we had left behind — left, to exchange for this; these four grimy walls, the dingy furniture, the sagging floors and the unblinking stare of the skylight — that eye which looked down and missed no part of our suffering — and which twinkled.

Hours passed. Jocelyn fell asleep on the moth-eaten couch; in the dim light her face seemed to grow more wan, more sharp, and hard; moisture started out upon her cheek and brow, a moisture that was like a film; under it her white face glistened; it was fever sweat; and I sat still and sullenly watched, and suffered.

On the floor around the walls stood my pictures, their bare, brown canvas backs turned outward; the half light and my hot eyes making of them some curious lichenous growth that linked the musty walls with the dry-rot of the floors. My pictures that would not sell — that would not sell. They were good; even in the cold, colorless light of discouragement I knew that they were good; but *they would not sell.* "Hold on for a few more exhibitions — one, two, perhaps — and your work will surely sell; it is catching on; it is receiving good notices; hang on!" they told me. Hang on, to what?



There came an unaccountable premonition of an immense evil

— in God's name, to what! Pack and move, move, move, from cheap studio to cheaper, till at last *this,* the shore edge of the End.

The very location of the house was symbolical of our plight; from the threshold, five paces and then but a rust eroded iron fence topping a rock-jagged cliff, and at its base the river that so soon lost itself in the sea. Of the money that was to have tided us over until success should come in the great city, there were left only a few dollars — the tottering iron fence; then to be without art materials, without food, shelterless — the rocky cliff; and then the plunge into the drudgery of some monotonous clerkship — the dark river that so soon lost itself in the sea.

"If she walks from the housetop unharmed, will you believe?"

AND who would want to hire a cripple? — who wanted a man with but a single arm, with one hand that was trained to no craft but the brush, to the beggarly trade of Art?

"Jocelyn," I cried, "Jocelyn!" But she did not hear, and in a moment I was glad, glad that she had not to hear me confess that I was afraid, and that I knew that I had failed. The weakness passed, and left me grim and youthless and hard-eyed. Presently the sun had dropped below the level of the skylight. So the day waned.

Then came the old woman of the pearl necklace. I started up from a doze to find her standing in the open doorway peering in at us in a strange, exulting way. I stared at her stupidly and could think of no word to say. Framed in the doorway, against the dusk of the outer hall, she looked like one of Goya's portraits suddenly stirred with life. She was all in black — black silk — and round her neck she wore a rope of pearls; there were many rings on her fingers and she clutched a small black bag in her hand. Old and fragile and small she was, and her features seemed to have partially sunk into the soft, puckered flesh of her face, flesh that looked as if it would feel to the touch like the flimsy silkiness of a collapsed toy balloon.

"Will you come in?" I faltered.

Jocelyn, startled, sat up at my words, and she too stared, heavy eyed, and *(Continued on Page 10)*

THE GREEN STONE

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have given a better account of myself.'

"I scarcely knew how it happened, but in the excitement of the moment every trace of the street minstrel had disappeared; I was speaking to a kindly English gentleman, and within a few minutes, as I accompanied him to the railway station, I had confided to him all that had occurred to me during the year. Before we parted he gave me his name and desired me to call upon him the next day at an address in Westminster.

"'I am anxious to know you better,' he said. 'I think your affairs in skilful hands might be pulled into shape. And I owe you an explanation of my appearance here in the guise of a street fiddler.'

"I discovered that my musician was the big engineering contractor, John Everard. To him I think I owe everything. At the outset he insisted on being my banker, till my own ship came home. He saved my book from the wreck of bankruptcy. More wonderful still, he succeeded in having my play staged. I have never looked back since.

"One evening in spring, he took me into his study after dinner, and when our pipes had been lit, he loosened a thin gold chain from his neck and passed it over to me. 'I want you to look at this, Hildred; what do you make of it?' At the end of the chain there was a small green pebble enclosed in a little case of silver filigree which almost concealed various characters or symbols finely engraved upon it. 'Unless it is a charm or talisman,' I replied — and I make the guess because you are wearing it — I have no notion of what it may be.'

"'It is a talisman, a lucky stone,' said Everard. 'When I was traveling twenty years ago in India I fell in with an old Buddhist priest and was able to render him material service. I slept one night in his old pagoda among the crumbling images which had been the offerings of forgotten generations, and the next day the old man gave me the stone as a parting gift. So long as I wore it, he said, no serious mischief could befall me and I should prosper in all I undertook. He warned me, however, that abnormal good fortune always ended in disaster unless means were taken to avert it.

"I WAS incredulous, of course, but by some odd chance I had a marvelous run of luck. In all sorts of risks and dangers I bore a really charmed life, and everything I touched turned to success. That was all right and jolly enough, but at last my unfailing luck grew so uncanny that it frightened me. Do you remember that creepy story of Herodotus about Polycrates? His best friend was scared away by his eerie good fortune, and in the end he perished on the cross. Time and again I was tempted to drop the green stone into the sea, and take my chances like other men—but I didn't.

"Well, I cast about for some means to stave off calamity. Frankly, Hildred, the dread of the green stone made me a better and more kindly fellow than ever I should have been without it. But moderation and decent living and generosity hardly seemed a sufficient propitiation of the unknown powers that appeared to be watching me. This must all seem craziness to you, but to me it was a real and dreadful necessity.

"'It is curious,' he went on, 'what casual trifles influence us. Glancing over the papers one day I noticed a passage in a review of Asolando, in which Browning describes how the Emperor Augustus, at the height of his power, spent one day in the year disguised as a beggar in the streets of Rome. That was the beginning of my street fiddling. You may well look amazed. But even as a beggar my luck pursued me, and I saw that if I was to touch poverty twice a year and live on what charity gave me, I must go out without my talisman. You can't guess the struggle I went through to do that. Until that moment I had never realized how thoroughly I had passed into slavery to an unknown power. Still I did succeed in laying myself bare to misfortune and taking my human chances. So far, nothing worse than you know has happened to me.'

"He stopped abruptly; then, after a long pause, 'What would you do?' he asked.

"'If I may speak frankly,' I replied, 'you have put the answer into my mouth. I suppose there is no use trying to convince you that the luck of the stone is all an illusion.'

"'None whatever,' he said.

"'Do you not think, then, that safety from risk and the best fortune in the world are too dearly bought if they enslave a man to unknown powers?'

"He nodded silently.

"'Then, why hesitate?'

"'My dear friend, you don't know what the word *fear* means.'

"'What more have you to fear than the worst that can befall any of us? You ask what I would do. I would smash this devilish little thing into powder and drop it into the fire.'

"Everard took the talisman and looked at it curiously. 'There are queerer things in the world,' he said, 'than most of us imagine. I know you don't believe in the virtue or deviltry of this green stone, yet it was only yesterday that I heard a hard-headed old traveler say that there was a sort of primeval instinct in the great deserts which drove even men like himself to do things that were grotesquely unscientific, but absolutely right.'

"The conversation drifted to other subjects, and though we often met, Everard never referred again to the talisman. Two or three years later, he was run down in the streets and killed by a motor car. It was mentioned at the inquest that he was carrying a violin at the time, but probably no one but myself perceived anything curious in the fact that the accident took place late on Midsummer Eve."

A LUCIFER OF THE HOUSETOPS

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vaguely alarmed. No one spoke. It was all intangibly unpleasant, like a dream that is half nightmare, half grotesquely humorous.

Her silk dress rustled faintly as if she were about to move, but she stood still and never spoke at all; her receding, puckered chin quivered like a frightened rabbit's and for an instant her pale eyes grew yet rounder with sudden fear. Then, as abruptly, the pleased look came back, and for the first time she spoke:

"And so, you too believe?" she said. She tripped lightly a little farther into the room.

"Will you sit down?" I said awkwardly.

She slipped back into the depths of our battered morris-chair and half lay there, her feet not touching the floor and swinging to and fro with little heel clickings like an excited child's; she gave a sigh of anticipation:

"Tonight he will give the sign that is demanded of him! Did you demand it too? *I* did not; *I* have attained to the Nineteenth Phase.

SHE was fumbling with the clasp of the little bag, which seemed strangely heavy. The clasp undid suddenly and a twenty-dollar gold-piece dropped to the floor; there was the tink of others from the depths of the bag. She gave the coin no heed, but proudly drew out a thin, brass circlet:

"This I am entitled to wear!" she said.

I handed back the piece of gold, and she took it with a little titter:

"When he gives the Sign —" She bobbed her head vigorously and put the circlet and the coin back in the bag. Jocelyn called me to her side:

"You will have to see if you can get her home, or at least notify her friends where to come for her — if she can tell where she lives, that is."

"Madam," I asked gently, "won't you tell me where your home is?"

She looked at me in sudden, angry suspicion.

"Where are the others? How did you get in?" she challenged; and then coming closer, she shrilled: "*Do* you believe?"

"Of course I believe," I said soothingly.

"Then what is the Word, the Word, the Word? What is it! You are an impostor; you do not know!" She was trembling with her vehemence.

"I am here in my own house, Madam," I said, and then: "I think that you had better let me see you home —" There was terror in her eyes again, and she seemed not to have heard my offer, only my assertion.

"The wrong house — the wrong house!" she muttered over and over; then she turned suddenly and scurried swiftly out of the room.

"Stop her!" Jocelyn cried. "We must not let her wander about the city; you must catch her!"

We reached the street door almost at the same instant, but she was out on the steps before I could seize her. A man had just passed the house and at sight of him she called shrilly a name I could not understand — it had a queer foreign tang to it. At the sound of her voice he wheeled and came swiftly back, and she ran to him and made an unmistakable, though hurried, gesture of reverence. I stood in uncertainty, watching, puzzled. She spoke but a few words; the man hesitated an instant, then came slowly toward me; she waited.

"I hope she did n't give you any trouble? This sort of thing happens every now and then; I am her lawyer," he explained.

"Now that," I thought to myself, "is a lie." He was heavy set — not fat — a man of medium height, bald, with a smooth-shaven, pale, round face that was greasy like tallow; under each of his eyes hung a pouch, discolored, that advertized him to be ticketed for a long Journey.

"No," I answered mechanically, "she gave no trouble."

"I am glad of that," he said graciously. "And did she say anything; did she mention me at all? No?" He gave an assured, easy little laugh. "It 's not always like that; sometimes she tells strangers great tales. Well, I 'll just take her home. Good night to you."

He called the old lady and they went away together, she leaning forward and peering up into his face in a rapture that was reverent and awed. They went away in the direction from which he had come, and I watched them to the corner, where he gave me a polite wave of the hand — and there they turned west and disappeared.

I climbed the dark and clattering stairs. Jocelyn was silent until I finished telling of the man with the tallow-like face, then: "He did not seem to be looking for her, you said? And you did not ask why he was in this out-of-the-way neighborhood? You should not have let her go — you should not have let her! It all seems wrong."

"Yes," I assented sulkily, "it does seem wrong, all wrong."

Now that the sun had almost set, it seemed that the outer air must be cooler, that anything would be more cool than the vapid air of the close room. I raised the blinds and the sash and stared out over the river, which seemed in its coppery greens to be running hot. In the brilliant orange and vermilion first coat of the new iron bridge, in the hot flush on a late lingering cumulus cloud dropping down back of Long Island, in the listless droop of the yellow leaves of our one scrawny, misshapen tree, in everything, everywhere, noxious, pestilential heat.

The children with their fire-crackers had come back to the streets now that the setting sun gave promise of truce; some one on a side street set off a whole pack that sputtered finely for a minute or two then died away with a few vicious pops; I had all but forgotten that it was a gala day.

IT WAS dusk when we finished our simple meal. If the heat of the day had been stifling, now that it was night, and the brightness was gone out of the air, the oppression of gloom was terrible; the low ceiling pressed upon us, the close walls hemmed us in.

"Let us go out upon the roof," I said, "at least there will be space about us; it will not seem like a sepulchre." We climbed a wobbling ladder that led up out of a dusty closet and which ended against a heavy trap-door that fitted down over a coaming. I lifted the trap-door, and we stepped out amongst the chimney-pots on to the flat roof. It was no cooler; but for the first time we drew great, free breaths. There was a fine tone of vastness and freedom about it all that made us give little gasps of relief; it made us feel like stretching our limbs as if they had been held down in cramped positions. From the black river there came a damp smell and a soft lapping, swishing sound which somehow made the air cooler. We congratulated each other — laughed again.

Of the ten houses that once formed our row, the northern five had been torn down to give place to the new bridge; Jocelyn and I were the sole tenants of the middle house that remained; the two between us and the bridge were condemned and were vacant; the next house to us on the south was but lately vacated, and the house on the corner owned by people in more prosperous circumstances than most of their neighbors — was closed for the summer. There was not a more lonely row in all the city.

An unwonted silence blessed the place, a silence that could not be disturbed by fire-crackers which seemed mere fantasy of noise after the ceaseless clatter kept up night and day by

the bridge-workers, whose rivettings and sledge hammerings, whose shrieking hoist-machines and the pantings of whose donkey-engines filled the hours with one long torment of sound. To those who could go, it became unendurable; to us who must stay, because of the cheap rents which it made, the noise was both blessing and curse.

It was quite dark now; from Jersey a great, black blanket of cloud was creeping imperceptibly nearer; above us was clear sky, blue-black and thickly studded with stars; there was no moon.

IT WAS so dark that I could not see my wife half distinctly enough; to me she is very beautiful. On this night she was wearing a clinging kimono of white china-silk that gleamed lustrously; from above its broad V-shaped collar her round full throat rose whiter than the dress; the sleeves came only to the elbow and from there fell in long sweeping lines almost to the ground — her celestial robe I called it. She had done her hair, childlike, in some simple knot on the top of her head because of the heat. The curve at the nape of her neck nestled against my shoulder as I leant against the blackened chimney.

The whole city seemed to be awakening from a stupor. From the side streets we could hear the confused hum of many voices; the crackle of fire-crackers increased tenfold; cheap rockets soared up all about us, — once a rocket stick struck the end roof with a sharp thud that made us both start; there was the glare of red-fire in nearby streets, and from a spray of sparks a succession of Roman-candle balls curved leisurely out over the river. We watched in pleased silence.

"Why do you not smoke?" Jocelyn asked suddenly.

"Because my tobacco is all down in our room, Beloved, and I am too lazy-comfortable to go for it," I said.

"Do get it," she commanded, "I like the smell of pipe smoke in the open this way."

"Wait for me then, if I must go," I answered.

"To the end of time," she mocked.

I must have been gone quite a long time, for I could not find the pouch. Once I went to the foot of the ladder and called, but she did not hear, and rather than climb the ladder — difficult, with but my one arm — I went back and searched anew. At last I had to give up, and climbed to the roof again.

"Jocelyn," I called, "where are you?"

My wife was not there.

For the smallest part of a minute I felt that it was play, that she had hidden from me, was crouching behind some of the many chimneys and would suddenly spring out and give a little cry at which I must pretend to be terribly alarmed; I grinned to myself at the jest. But in an instant that thought was gone and there came an unaccountable premonition of an immense evil.

"Stop this child's play, Jocelyn," I cried harshly, furious at myself for my nervous, womanish fear. "Come out I say!" and I grew angrier and more ashamed. But she did not come out.

"I have frightened her!" I thought, and I called softly: "Forgive me, dear; I am nervous, that is all." She was not behind any of the chimneys on our roof; I had known that. I leaped over the low coping that separated ours from the roof adjoining, and searched with quick dartings from chimney to chimney — not there, as I had known. There were other roofs to search over; but the thought that had tortured me from the first could no longer be kept down. Slowly I edged to the front of the roof and even then stood for an instant staring straight out; then, sickening with horror, I looked down. The corner lamp shone brightly, and I could see the entire length of the row; not there!

The small courts at the back of each house were separated one from the other by high board fences which threw each court into shadow; I looked down into each one, and saw nothing; had she been there I could instantly have seen the white dress even in the gloom. Thanks be to God, she was not there! And then, weak and spent, I slowly went down into the house and dully searched through each of the bare, re-echoing rooms — often holding the match until it burnt itself out against my finger, and at the time feeling no pain. I climbed to the roof again and sat there a long time, stupefied, deadened by a loss that seemed so impossible to have occurred.

Once I started to my feet and ran heavily over the housetops, looking stupidly behind the chimneys of the other houses where I had not searched before — not there. Back on my own roof again, I stumbled against the trap-door that stood up on its own edge, and it clattered down into place over the hatchway; I stared at it for an instant, and then went to a chimney and sank down against it.

A drop of rain spattered on my upturned face; I became dimly conscious of distant rumbling thunder, that the stars had disappeared, and for a moment I was aware of the hot, dead hush that precedes the breaking of a storm. Then I forgot it all, and went on with my own heavy thoughts.

VOICES of children in the little street between the house fronts and the iron fence, rose shrill and angry; the children were discharging their fireworks out over the river; now they were quarreling together because of the coming storm, some wishing to fire all the remainder at once, and to go home, the others, to save them to shoot one at a time when the storm was done. Scarce knowing what I did I walked to the edge of the roof and stood watching them; the quarrel was suddenly ended by two little boys snatching the largest rocket and running away with it; the other children chased them for a little distance and then returned; there was a salvo of half a dozen rockets, and then the children ran for home through the now pelting rain.

The shower of sparks drifted down upon the house-tops and I idly watched them strike and swiftly die — all but one, which lay upon the end roof and glowed with a steady unwavering light. Mechanically I crossed the intervening roofs, and raised my foot to stamp it out; it was not a spark, it was a tiny point of light that came from a small rent in a tarpaulin that covered a skylight in the condemned and vacant house. In an instant I had stooped and torn the hole larger. All my lethargy was gone; here was hope. At first I could see nothing, for the skylight was over a mere air-shaft; but I tore the hole still larger, and then through a small window that looked out upon the air-shaft from the second floor, I caught a glimpse of a room that seemed filled with people who appeared greatly excited; the sound of their voices came to me through the glass in a confused, indistinguishable hum; they were moving restlessly about and constantly crossed my narrow field of vision.

Almost at my first glance I had seen the old woman with the pearl necklace and the black bag; she was wearing a brass circle around her forehead — the insignia of the Nineteenth Phase. I could not see the man with whom she had gone away, but I was certain that he was somewhere near. Also, I knew, by some strange subconscious power, that Jocelyn was there.

I tore the tarpaulin in a dozen places trying to get a better view, but the skylight was so narrow that the angle was too great to allow me more than a glimpse. Nor could I hear; and because of the noise it would make, I dared not break the glass;

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A Lucifer of the Housetops

(Continued from Page 11)

but at last I discovered a pane from which there was one small corner broken, and at the next crash of thunder I tore up the pane, and a babble of sound poured out; at the same instant I saw the whole interior of the room — and Jocelyn.

Because the broken pane was on the same side of the air-shaft as the window, I could not see into the room, but directly across the shaft was another window, closed, of an unlighted room; it was as though I looked upon a mirror! The reflected room that I saw was bare except for a small table, one chair, and the paraphernalia of a charlatan; on the table stood the crystal-ball upon a plush cushion; all around it were palm-charts, rolled and unrolled and crushed by books and divining rods, and overtopped by a dilapidated skull; at one corner of the table a battered brass censor sent up a reek of pale smoke.

The tallow-faced man, clothed in shabby evening dress, was bending over the crystal-ball; Jocelyn, her head bowed and hands clasped behind her, faced him at the opposite end of the table; her back was toward me, so that I could not see her face. At the other side of the room there huddled a small group of a dozen or more people; several were flat chested, weakling men, the rest, women.

The man at the table began to talk vehemently, swinging his arms about until he had worked himself into a fury; as reflected by the dirty window pane, it was all pantomime — wavering, distorted pantomime. The thunder of the sky and the thunder of the rain on the roofs drowned the sound of his shoutings, so that, strain as I might, I could scarce hear one word in ten. The rain drove down in rushes that made white, opaque walls all about me, and lashed the deepening water on the housetops into pale foam; it beat me down as by a great pressure, and took my breath from my body, and confused my head so that I could not think what I should do. I dared not leave till I knew what was to be Jocelyn's part; they might take her away before I could get into the house.

The rain began to fall more steadily with a monotone roar above which I could distinguish more of what was said.

THEY had embraced a new religious cult, I gathered; a quack mixture of star-worship, mystic rites and abracadabra; a religion of amulets and talismans, second sight and spiritualism, cheaply done and befuddlingly entangled. The tallow-faced man was their Prophet — and treasurer. "Money," I heard that word oftenest of all. This was evidently the crucial moment for the Prophet; he had led these weaklings up to this final fleecing and he had led them too fast; now they had taken fright and had rudely turned against him. He had overated their credulity, had mulcted them to the quick, and they were stung into doubts. Was he a prophet? He must prove it, then they would give him their all. They had demanded a sign, any sign, so only that it prove him.

I saw him point to Jocelyn, who looked like some spirit in the trailing, clinging white robe, and I strained to hear what he would say; but there came a crash of thunder that seemed to rock the chimneys, and the rain came lashing down again like whips, and I could only hear something about "stars" and "this answer." It seemed to puzzle the worshippers as much as it did me; they had drawn closer together, defiant and sullen; they shook their heads — his Sign was about to fail. The old woman of the Nineteenth Phase suddenly stepped out from the group and pointed an accusing finger at Jocelyn; I could hear the shrillness of her voice, but not the words; I believe that she was telling them that his Sign was only the girl from next door — *she* knew! The Prophet, as if to confirm his statement, pointed dramatically to the crystal ball; they all shouted, "NO" — I heard that; the old tricks were played out. He paused for a moment, irresolute; there was a baffled look in his face; a wit's-end struggle for the next move. He flung up his hand, and they gave him a reluctant silence. I do not think that he knew then what he should do; for he did not speak at all, but turned his back to them so that he faced Jocelyn — and me — and stared in desperate abstraction, unconscious that he was staring straight into her eyes.

Suddenly I saw his jaw drop in surprise, and then his face lit up with an expression of relief and of evil joy. Instantly his old time mask-look came back, the eyes stared cold, fixed; imperceptibly he bent his body and thrust forward his face closer, closer to Jocelyn, all the time making queer, delicate wavings with his hands and fingers, which were hidden by his body from the worshippers behind him.

I could not comprehend, not until I saw him move one hand as if softly beating time, saw Jocelyn's lithe body sway and follow the rhythm of his motions, saw in distorted reflection the smile of triumph on his round face; only then did I realize that he had hypnotized, mesmerized my wife to do, I knew not what; I sprang to my feet with a cry of fear.

As I raced across the roof toward the hatchway, there came a flash of lightning that blinded me and I tripped over one of the low stone copings and fell, and scrambled to my feet again and ran on. Not until I reached the trap-door and stooped to raise it did I realize that my only arm was broken, and that I was trapped and absolutely helpless.

And then I raged up and down the roofs and screamed in my utter helplessness to lift my hand to save my wife from harm. I rushed to the end of the row next the street, and shouted and only the thunder answered me, and I raged and roared against the louder voice of the thunder; but from the empty streets there came no help, no sound from fellow men. And then, dizzy with pain I ran back again to the trap-door; it fitted down over the coaming of the hatchway like a lid on a box, and I could not kick it aside and I could not raise one corner a hair's breadth though I got down on my knees and tore at it with my teeth. Then I fainted.

WHEN I regained consciousness the rain had ceased and the thunder was a mere mutter in the distance. I scrambled to my feet and tried in a dazed way to remember; then I stood staring from behind a chimney, in wonder at what I saw. They were upon the roof — all of them upon the roof! They knelt from the skylight to the back edge of the roof, in a long single row, black and motionless against the wet shine of the rain-washed housetop, and down and along the line, backing step by step toward the edge, there passed the Prophet, drawing Jocelyn after him foot by foot.

It was still early in the night, not eleven o'clock, and from the little street in front of the house there came the voices of children quarreling. For an instant their shrill voices caught my ear, then were instantly forgotten.

The Prophet was very near the edge now; I stood like one who is dead. Slowly he backed away, and slowly, a few feet between them, she followed after, her long white robe trailing and her arms outstretched, like one who walks in her sleep, swaying gently from side to side to the rhythm of his slowly motioning arm. He held up his hand and she stood still.

"If she walks from the housetop unharmed, will you believe?"

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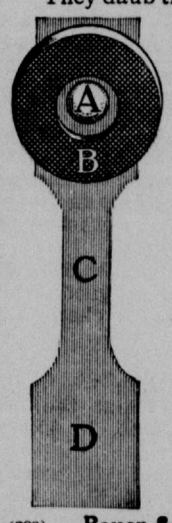

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